18
The beast without: the moa as a colonial frontier myth in New Zealand

ATHOLL ANDERSON

From the earliest days of 18th-century exploration, Europeans found it difficult to come to terms with the scarcity of large animals in New Zealand. In a temperate land the size of Britain, and more various in its topography and vegetation, there were plenty of small birds but almost no terrestrial mammals; only tiny bats that were rarely seen, a small introduced rat, and the domestic dog of the Maori. In particular the vast forests struck Europeans as uncannily deserted.

The sailors at once put their imaginations to work and came up with sightings of various small quadrupeds, a polar bear, a kangaroo 10 m tall, a merman, and a number of water monsters. Their speculations were propelled, in part, by Maori tales of *taniwha*—dragon-like or saurian water monsters—and other mythological beings, but none of these, nor the early European monsters, were taken seriously by the colonists who began to arrive from Britain in the 1830s. It was only about ten years later that a believable monster captured the public imagination. The giant ostrich-like birds known by the Maori name of moa *(Dinornithiformes),* which were undeniably evidenced by enormous bones which often lay upon the ground, became the subject of intense speculation, not least about whether they might still survive in the forests and mountains of the interior. The Maori view was that moa had been extinct for some centuries,[1] but that discouragement notwithstanding, and despite the lack of any Maori claims to moa sightings after 1840, Europeans began to report encounters with giant birds from this time onward.

This chapter assumes that no real moa were involved in these incidents. In my view the evidence, extensively reviewed elsewhere (Anderson n.d.) is plain: moa were extinct by the 16th or 17th centuries. One argument will suffice here. There are no reports of moa dating to the first 60 years of European contact after 1780, and no alleged sightings until after the osteological evidence of moa and its implications had been widely disseminated in New Zealand. Most sightings date, in fact, to the later 19th century (1850–80). The issue here, then, is the significance of moa *visions,* or reports of such manifestations. Nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity I shall refer to the observations as being of moa, although I propose the class 'colonial moa', more or less in the analogical sense conveyed by 'colonial goose'.[2]

Table 18.1 Alleged sightings of moa by Europeans.

Date of sighting	Observer(s)	Locality	Source
1830s	Robert Clark	unlocalized	Field 1893, p. 562
1830s	George Pauley	inland Otago	Taylor 1855, p. 238
1842	two Americans	Kaikoura range	Colenso 1879, p. 69
1840s	E. Jessop	Dun Mountain	Beattie n.d.
1850	men with Lt Impey	Kaikoura range	Buick 1931, p.275
1850s	anon. prospectors	Oroua Valley	Field 1893, p. 567
1858	anon. prospectors	Mt Arthur	OW 2 October 1858
1859	anon. prospectors	Takaka range	Field 1893, p. 564
1860	James Cameron	Waiau Valley	Beattie 1958, p. 38
1863	Walker and Smith	Harris range	ODT 21 January 1863
1863	Cottier	Mohikinui R.	*Nelson Examiner* 12 May 1863
1863	anon. prospector	Southern Alps	ODT 23 July 1863
1867	anon. prospector	North Otago	Beattie 1938, p. 44
1870	prospectors/ Sutherland	Rangitikei V.	Field 1893, p. 565
1873	anon. shepherd	Waiau Valley	OW 12 April 1873
1876	Slight and Hunt	Rangitikei V.	Haast 1948, p. 804
1870s	anon. boy	Whangaehu V.	Beattie 1958, p. 34
1870s	McDonald	Waiau Valley	Beattie n.d.
1896	Charles Port	Lake Hauroko	Overton
1896	anon. boy	Brunner	Beattie 1958, p. 41
1940	Miss Chell	Wanganui	ODT 18 September 1958

Note: ODT—*Otago Daily Times;* OW—*Otago Witness*.

European claims of contemporary moa survival can be divided into three groups (Anderson n.d.). Of 44 cases, 3 are admitted hoaxes and several are simple mistakes of transcription between one reference and another. Many of the remainder refer to carefully described encounters with real birds that could not have been moa, or to other phenomena such as loud cries, tracks, feathers, crashing noises in the forest and so on that might fit with a variety of explanations. Eliminating these leaves 21 claims of direct sightings spread over the century from the late 1830s to 1940 (Fig. 18.1, Table 18.1). Fourteen of these encounters, and the best described, occurred between 1850 and 1880 and there is only one from later than 1900. To appreciate what claimants reported it is useful to outline a selection of cases.

(a) In 1842 William Colenso was told by a ‘mechanic’ who had recently come from Cloudy Bay that the moa existed in the Kaikoura ranges. One night two Americans and a Maori guide took weapons, he said, and ‘ascended the mountain to the place where these birds resort, where, at the native’s request, they hid themselves behind some bushes. Presently they saw the monster majestically stalking down in search of food; they were, however, so petrified with horror at the sight as to be utterly unable to fire…they observed him for near an hour… They described this animal as being fourteen or sixteen feet in height’ (Colenso 1879, p. 69).

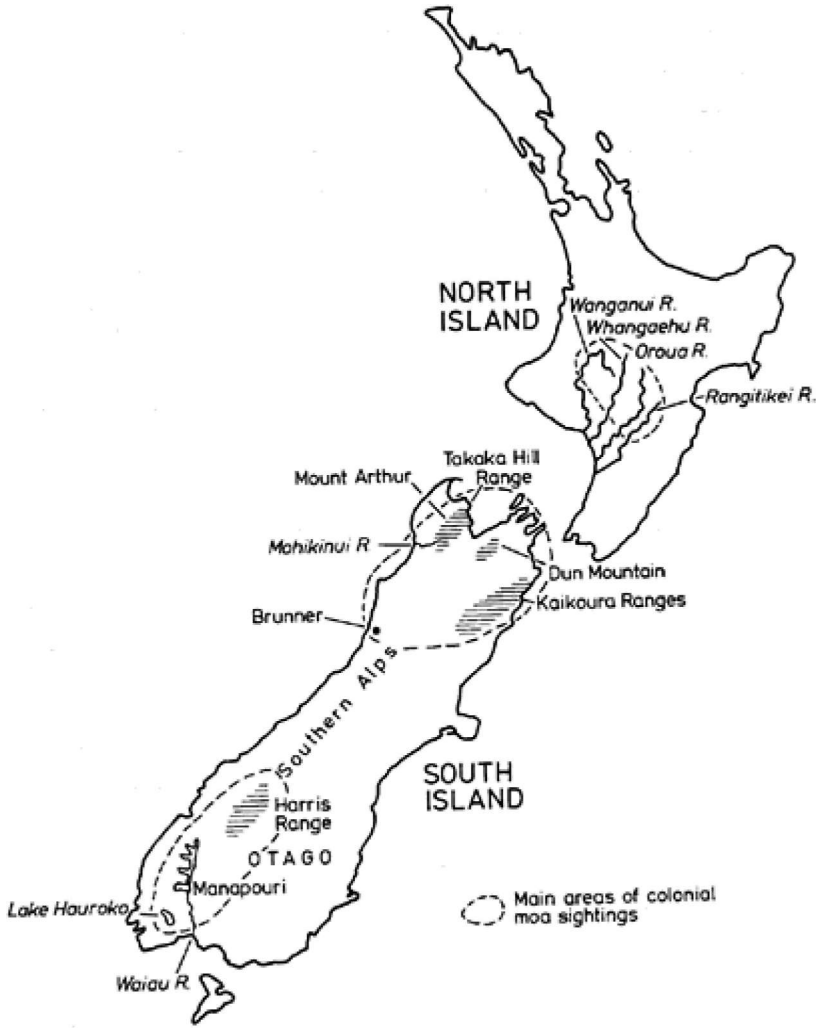

Figure 18.1 A map of New Zealand showing the main areas of colonial moa sightings and places mentioned in the text.

(b) One evening in 1858, in the goldfields district about Mount Arthur, a moa 14 ft tall was chased into a cave by miners. The next morning the miners returned and found a young bird like a goose, covered in yellow down, which they exhibited to others at a shilling a head (*Otago Witness* 2 October 1858).

(c) In 1859 'Four English migrants…farm labourers…proceeded to Golden Gully [Takaka Hill range] looking for work, and shortly after went some miles further on prospecting, I presume. They returned in great alarm one day stating that they had come suddenly upon an enormous bird standing at the entrance to a cave or hollow on the hillside. They described the bird as standing about 8 ft. or 9 ft., of a brown colour, with a red mark around the eye. With the greatest difficulty we persuaded them to show us the spot…and we examined the cave and other places for the period of two or three days…these countrymen were thoroughly frightened…[and]…had never heard of a moa… I do not think they could ever have been twenty miles from their home.' (Major Locket to H.C.Field, in Field 1893, p. 564).

(d) In 1860 a shepherd called James Cameron, who had just arrived from Scotland, took up a job on the Manapouri Run. One day he came to the eastern bank of the Waiau River and 'To his great surprise he saw a huge bird emerge from the scrub on the opposite side of the river, walk along the sandy river bank, and finally disappear. At the time he had not heard of the Moa.' (Beattie 1958, p. 38).

(c) In 1863 two miners camped in the mountains about twenty miles beyond the Arrow River goldfield looked up at a dusk to the edge of a terrace about 300–400 m. away and saw 'a large bird apparently seven or eight feet high… The bird sat down for about ten minutes…it had a long head as large apparently as that of a horse. The bird then walked away.' The next morning the miners followed its tracks and saw where it had ripped the edible hearts from cabbage trees along its route (*Otago Daily Times* 21 January 1863).

(f) In 1863 a recently arrived immigrant named Cottier was walking beside a creek that flowed into the Mohikinui River on the West Coast. It was early morning and he suddenly noticed a bird like a giant woodhen *(Gallirallus australis)* about 200 m. away. 'Its head was hard looking, dark coloured, and flat at the top, with a semi-circle of red below the eyes. The head of the bird was as large as that of a calf, and standing about eight feet from the ground.' Cottier observed the bird for some time and then returned to his camp for a gun. When he came back the bird was gone (*Nelson Examiner* 12 May 1863).

(g) A party of miners, also in 1863, undertook an expedition through the Southern Alps in western Otago. One night a bird, about 3 m tall 'thrust its head over the [camp] fire but only remained a very short time; the dogs gave chase and they heard it for some time making its way through the timber.' The miners made a trap from logs and laid about it some large, baited eel hooks. In the morning the fishing lines were broken and the logs overturned (*Otago Daily Times* 23 July 1863).

(h) In 1870 a group of twelve to fourteen prospectors about 100km. up the Rangitikei River saw a moa. It was during a cold winter with heavy snow on the ground and the sighting 'frightened the life out of the lot of them. They cleared for their bare lives… [when the moa came out of the bush and stalked across a clearing]'. Later a sheepfarmer called Sutherland said that he saw the moa. 'It must have stood 16 ft. or

17 ft. high, and the body a tremendous size…it was speckle or greyish colour, with a woolly look.' (Olsen to H.C.Field, in Field 1893, p. 565).

(i) In 1873 a shepherd's dog flushed a moa from a patch of scrub near the Waiau River. 'The moa ran from the dog until it reached the brow of a terrace above him, and some thirty or forty yards off, when it turned on the dog… The moa stood for fully ten minutes…bending its long neck up and down exactly as the black swan does when disturbed. It is described as being very much higher than any emu…and as standing very much more erect on its legs. The colour of its feathers is described as a sort of silvery grey, with greenish streaks through it.' (*Otago* Witness 5 April 1873).

(j) 'In November 1876, according to the *Rangitikei Advocate,* Mr George Slight, working on the Paraekaretu block, saw a young bird about four and a half ft. high, with a long hooked bill and very small wings. He and a Mr Hunt gave chase, but the bird ran away from them very swiftly.' Next morning their employer measured the bird's footprints and found that they were larger than his own and showed evidence of partial webbing. The weather atthe time was intensely hot according to Haast (1948, p. 804), who records this odd tale.

There are a number of points about these stories and others like them that ought to be noticed. First, the moa are generally very tall: up to twice as tall as the tallest species of Dinornithidae (ostrich). The emphasis upon height is, however, seldom accompanied by much interest in bulk. A tall, rather slim creature more like an ostrich than a moa seems to be what the observers generally had in mind (Fig. 18.2).[3] In addition, the imposing size is sometimes underlined by other potentially threatening features such as a very large, hard-looking head, red rims about the eyes, very large feet, or a hooked bill. Second, the behaviour of the moa is audacious and somewhat mysterious. They never attack the observers, no matter how close, but neither do they flee in fright. They often stand in conspicuous positions for lengthy periods of time before disappearing unhurriedly. They are also silent, despite an insistence on blood-curdling cries in contemporary stories about unseen moa.

Of equal importance are the circumstances in which colonial moa were seen. In most instances they appeared in the early morning or at dusk, sometimes at night. They were usually seen towards the limits of observation, for example, in the light of a fire, on the skyline, or on the edge of a forest.[4] Most importantly, whenever the information is recorded, it is almost invariably the case that these moa were seen by recent immigrants. Established settlers, surveyors, scientists and so on never reported sightings of moa, despite their frequent speculations on the subject and their reports of other phenomena that they attributed to surviving moa.

What, then, are we to make of colonial moa? My hypothesis begins with the common suggestion that people who see visions, or simply report having seen them, are likely to be under some sort of unusual stress. The stress in the present case arises from the fact of migration. Mid-19th-century European immigrants to New Zealand were faced with a variety of challenges, and all at once. On top of the business of making a living in difficult circumstances they had to adapt to an unfamiliar landscape and climate, a new social milicu, and the anxieties and loneliness of finding a psychological accommodation to the loss of family and friends and the imposition of new standards of social and moral behaviour. There is a good deal of particular evidence of these problems in the diaries and

letters written by migrants, but as yet no broader synthesis of the New Zealand material. Studies of voluntary migrants from Europe in other situations, however, have revealed a significant increase in feelings of helplessness, frustration and aggression, as well as in that intense longing for the familiar we generally call homesickness but which can reach the proportions of 'migrant psychosis' (Malmberg 1980, pp. 112–14).

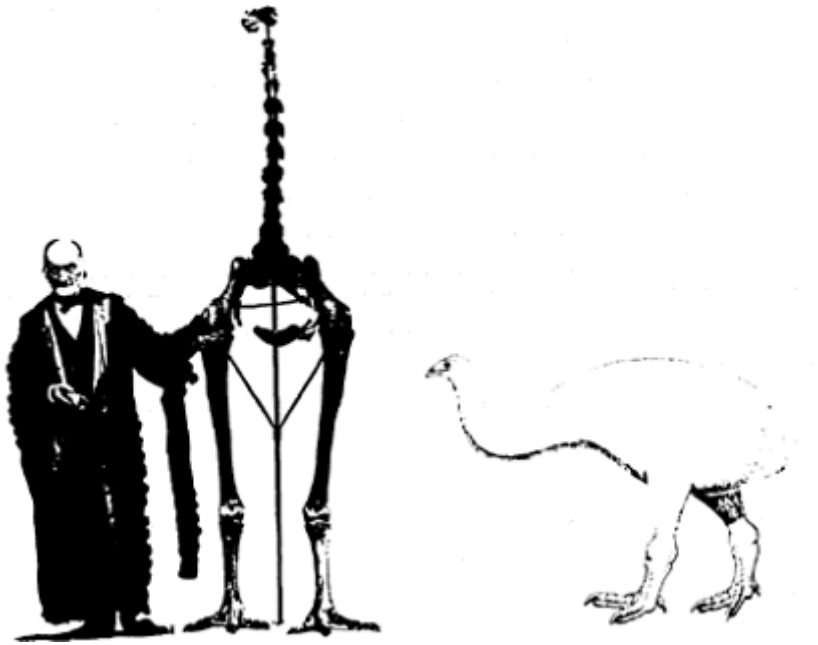

Figure 18.2 19th-century man and moa: Richard Owen beside a moa skeleton assembled in the unnaturally elongated style of the times. At right is a modern drawing of a reconstructed moa (after McCulloch 1982).

These anxieties are likely to be experienced most strongly by recent immigrants, of course, and I argue that they are also likely to be strongest amongst the poorer or less educated. Lacking much practical experience of geographical or social diversity, the latter had most to learn and the fewest resources to assist them.

In one particular respect the balance between colonial opportunities and perils was, for such people, a fine one. In the socially simplified and somewhat egalitarian settler societies that characterized 19th-century European migration in rural districts, they also had the opportunity of significant social advancement (Wynn 1983, pp. 358–9). But there was a ticklish corollary. If the way up had been shortened and eased, the way down was equally facilitated and it led right off the end of the social scale. For small subsistence farmers, shepherds or prospectors far from settlements, and whose only social intercourse was of the most rudimentary kind, the distance between their unsocial existence and that of a savage, as they conceived it, was uncomfortably short.

The problem was exacerbated by the desire to push across the frontier and farther still

from civilization. For the poorer or less clever colonist who was the loser in the brisk competition of colonial life, almost all the potential satisfaction of material aspirations had to lie in the wilderness across the frontier. But dreams of what this far and future state might hold were accompanied by fear of the dangers of the unknown. Often this resulted in ambivalent beliefs about the wilderness, such as the idea, amongst some colonists in the northern part of the South Island, that a great inland plain lay beyond the mountains, across which stalked giant birds that might kick a man to death.[5] Materially attractive but socially repugnant, the wilderness was thus a source of considerable anxiety to the recent colonist. In this context it is possible, I think, to understand something about the symbolism of colonial moa sightings.

The colonist's dilemma may be restated in this way: released from a familiar landscape, society and social order he is confronted with increasing unfamiliarity and disorder as he moves closer to the wilderness, but he is compelled towards that goal by the aspirations, or desperation, that prompted his migration in the first place. His fear is that geographical and social disorder will upset his own moral and psychological order (cf. Douglas 1970, p. 114), and that the wilderness will induce in him the appropriate moral degeneracy of a disordered world and thus reduce him to the status of a savage or wild man.

The Wild Man has been, of course, a long-standing and powerful image of individual moral and material dissolution in European civilization (White 1978, pp. 150–81, Thomas 1983, p. 134). It is an image of personal rather than group decline and the intimacy of the threat has been translated into a spatial conception of the Wild Man as 'inhabiting the immediate confines of the community. He is just out of sight, over the horizon, in the nearby forest …[he]…is conceived to be covered in hair and to be black and deformed …[and he]…almost always represents the image of the man released from social control' (White 1978, p. 166). The Wild Man could thus come to the mind's eye as a grotesque human or human-like monster whose manifestation marked the edge of the wilderness. In this marginal position his relationship to the observer had an element of ambiguity. The threat represented by the Wild Man might be plain enough, but the fate was not inevitable and his appearance on the frontier served as a territorial warning that a prudent traveller would heed.

In the present case, however, it was moa that were seen, and not wild men or other human forms. Furthermore there existed appropriate models for an indigenous Wild Man image, had one been sought. The Maori feared a race of wild humans, known as *maero,* who were entirely covered in hair except upon the forehead and who skewered their prey by means of their long, sharp fingernails. There was some initial interest shown in *maero* by early European travellers in the South Island interior, but the myth seems to have been overtaken on several fronts before it could gain a hold on the European imagination.[6] The testimony of moa bones, which proved that these giant beasts had existed, and not long before, rapidly promoted moa to pre-eminence in the public mind during the 1840s. At the same time the *maero* myth became entangled with Maori stories of the 'Lost Tribe' and was thus ensnared by the Noble Savage image, which is the obverse of the Wild Man coin (cf. White 1978, p. 191).

But apart from anything else, colonial moa were really a quite sufficient model for the Wild Man image to inhabit. Conceived as tall, upright, rather slim, bipedal creatures that

were conspicuously covered in feathers (sometimes of a woolly appearance), and occasionally having large heads and eyes, they were at once ambiguously human, as suited their degenerate status, and almost believable to a morphologically adequate extent as moa.

One proposition may be added to conclude this argument. If fear of our own capacity for uninhibited behaviour, especially violence, is metaphorically designated the Beast Within (e.g. Midgley 1980, pp. 36–44, 1988), then fear of what we might become in situations beyond our present experience may be regarded as the Beast Without. But as soon as one creates this juxtaposition it becomes evident that these fears are essentially the same: the loss of civilized standards of social and moral behaviour. The Beast Without is also the Beast Within, or to put it another way, the colonists at the frontier feared themselves and sometimes projected their fears into warning visions of quasihuman moa.

It is not difficult to see that an interesting comparison might be made between this explanatory model and other cases of similar frontier myths, which stem, in the European literature at any rate, from 19th-century colonial observations. The human-like Sasquatch, Yeti, and Almasti are obvious examples (Shackley 1982). More broadly, this study suggests that further analysis of the nature imagery of 19th-century European settler societies may contribute to our understanding of other aspects of the anthropology of migration and colonisation.[7]

Notes

1 Of 34 references to this question by Maori, only five considered moa survived beyond 1840, and then only by vague speculation about survival in remote areas. The few prosaic recollections of moa stood alongside an elaborate mythological tradition of moa as giant birds with human faces and other odd characteristics (Anderson n.d.).

2 Actually a dish of rolled, stuffed mutton flap—gooselike but no goose.

3 One immediate origin of this conception was possibly the moa skeletons in museums which were frequently set up in an unnaturally elongated fashion in the mid-19th century (Fig. 18.2). There were no reconstructed moa to demonstrate body bulk until the end of the century.

4 If any actual thing was seen in the Central Otago cases it might have been a feral horse or bovine beast, since these were sparsely distributed throughout the district before the arrival of prospectors in the 1860s.

5 These tales also belong, of course, to the universal class of stories about a flawed utopia.

6 In the Coromandel district of the northern North Island well away from areas of colonial moa sightings, the miners did, in fact, take up a *maero* myth. It still persists as the so-called ‘Moehau Monster’.

7 As Thomas (1983, p. 40) argues, animal symbols were also useful in the continuous process of human self-definition (see also Rowland 1973, p. xv).

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